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Automobile in American Life and Society

Driving While Black: The Car and Race Relations in Modern America

by Thomas J. Sugrue

Introduction

In the spring of 1998, New Jersey state police pulled over a van on the state turnpike carrying four young black men on their way to basketball tryouts at North Carolina Central University. What happened next was the subject of debate: the men claimed to be cooperating, but police charged that the van's driver, in an act of rage, backed up and attempted to run them over. The result was bloodshed. The police fired and three of the four occupants of the van were wounded. When the police searched the van, they found no weapons, no drugs, nothing but basketball equipment and a bible.

The New Jersey Turnpike generated protests and demands for state and federal investigations of the New Jersey state police. Unwittingly the van drivers and the police reopened an intense national debate about "racial profiling"--the allegation that law enforcement officials target certain groups because of their race or ethnicity. The debate hinged around one of the most important and contested arenas of race relations in modern America--the automobile.

Complaints of the police "profiling" black and Hispanic drivers were nothing new, either in New Jersey or in the nation as a whole. African Americans had long complained about being pulled over for what they sardonically called "driving while black." Civil rights organizations regularly fielded complaints by black and Hispanic motorists who charged that they had been pulled over for minor traffic infractions or for no apparent reason at all. One African American doctor who owned a gold-colored BMW reported that he had been stopped about fifty times in his travels through New Jersey but never issued a ticket. The very fact that he was a black man in a flashy car attracted the attention of the police. The local and national news media uncovered dozens of such stories, but New Jersey state officials continued to deny charges that the state police engaged in racial profiling and defended police conduct as nondiscriminatory.

Under increasing public pressure, the New Jersey State Attorney General established a task force in 1999 to investigate complaints of racial profiling. Many civil rights activists were skeptical about the objectivity of a report to be issued by the same state officials who had vocally defended police conduct on the state highways. They were surprised. The State Attorney General's Task Force report on racial profiling made national headlines, especially for its grim and convincing picture of the prevalence of racial profiling on New Jersey's highways. Drawing from 1997-98 data, state officials found that forty percent of traffic stops involved black and Hispanic motorists (who were only about thirteen percent of all drivers on the New Jersey Turnpike). Eighty percent of those arrested during traffic stops were people of color. The profiling debate brought the problem of racial profiling to national attention, led to the resignation of the state's top police official, and prompted state governments in New Jersey and elsewhere to rewrite regulations to forbid police officers from singling out drivers because of their race or ethnicity.

The phenomenon of being pulled over for "driving while black" highlights the connections between the history of the automobile and the history of African Americans. The twentieth-century transformations of black America--the rise and fall of Jim Crow the Great Migration of blacks from south to the north, the dramatic growth in the black industrial labor force, and the rise of a black-oriented consumer culture--all of these coincided and were shaped by the rise of the automobile. From its earliest days, the automobile symbolized mobility and freedom for blacks--but at the same time also reinforced their status as unfree. For African Americans in the twentieth century, cars became a powerful symbol of "making it," of economic success. Just as importantly, the auto industry became one of the nation's largest and most important employers of African Americans. But as the New Jersey racial profiling cases made so clear, African Americans have had a complex, often ambivalent relationship to the car and to the automobile industry.

The Car and Jim Crow

For blacks, as well as for whites, cars had real practical value--as a means of getting to work, of travelling, of visiting family and friends. But cars had other, deeper meanings for many African Americans. Perhaps most importantly, they helped blacks to escape the insults of Jim Crow.

From the late nineteenth century through the civil rights revolution of the 1950s and 1960s, American blacks faced some of the harshest indignities of legal segregation on buses, streetcars, and trains. In the South, black patrons at bus and train stations were cordoned off into separate waiting rooms, with separate bathrooms, drinking fountains, and (when they were provided to blacks at all) separate concession stands. On trains, they were confined to separate, inferior Jim Crow cars. In railroad dining cars, a curtain separated black passengers from whites. On urban public transportation, black and white passengers were separate and unequal. Black passengers were required to sit at the back of buses and trolleys--and to give up their seats to whites on demand. Black

passengers who challenged Jim Crow on public transportation systems faced insult, personal injury, arrest, and even death at the hands of angry whites.

The car provided southern blacks a way to subvert Jim Crow. As Gunnar Myrdal noted in his exhaustive study of black America published in 1944, "the coming of the cheap automobile has meant for Southern Negroes, who can afford one, a partial emancipation from Jim Crowism." Blacks who could afford to travel by car did so as a way of resisting the everyday racial segregation of buses, trolleys, and trains, for as one observer noted, "Race is most completely ignored on the public highway.... Effective equality seems to come at about twenty-five miles an hour or above." In 1936, sociologist Arthur Raper, who studied race relations in rural Georgia, noted that the "opportunities provided by the automobile provide a basis for a new mobility for whites as well as Negroes, based upon personal standards rather than upon community mores--upon which the individual wants to do rather than what the community does not want him to do." Driving gave southern blacks a degree of freedom that they did not have on public transportation or in most public places.

For all of the "new mobility" of the car, driving still posed difficulties for blacks. African American travelers regularly carried buckets or portable toilets in their car trunks because service station bathrooms and roadside rest areas were usually closed to them. Black motorists also found it difficult to find places to stay: most roadside motels--north and south--refused to admit blacks. Diners and fine restaurants alike regularly turned away black customers. By the 1930s, however, black motorists could consult guidebooks to make their way through the countryside with as few hassles as possible. The first of the genre, the *Negro Motorist Green Book,* in 1936, promised to provide "the Negro traveler information that will keep him from running into difficulties, embarrassments, and to make his trip more enjoyable." Black newspapers also ran advertisements for "race" hotels, restaurants, and resorts where black customers were welcome.

Traveling on back roads brought other dangers for the black motorist. The phenomenon of being stopped for "driving while black" did not begin with New Jersey in the 1990s. Throughout the twentieth century, black drivers regularly complained that they were harassed by police officers. It was commonplace advice that black motorists should drive below the posted speed limit--but not too slow as to attract attention--because police officers would regularly stop blacks for traveling even one mile an hour faster than what was posted. Some black drivers took road trips at night, when it was harder for police to identify them by skin color as they drove down dark country roads. Interracial travel was especially dangerous, especially in the South. Blacks who drove with whites in the same car put themselves at risk of arrest or violence. Only when it was clear that the black driver was a chauffeur could blacks and whites share the same car without arousing suspicion. When black and white civil rights activists took the risk of driving together through the south, whites usually sat in the back with a single black driver in the front to fool the police.

As the battle for racial equality heated up in the 1950s and the 1960s, cars became battlegrounds over the future of racial equality. Cars provided a means for black opponents of Jim Crow to escape violence. When he testified against whites who had lynched his nephew Emmett Till in 1955, Mose Wright was whisked out of Mississippi by car under the cover of darkness. The memoirs of civil rights activists are full of stories about the terror of driving down dark country roads, of ducking to avoid being seen by passing whites, of being followed by unidentified cars, and of taking long detours to avoid the police. Not all of the automobile stories had happy endings. During the summer of 1964, three young civil rights activists, Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman, were followed by white racists, dragged from their car, and murdered. The charred hulk of their car was found submerged in a swamp.

Outside the South, particularly during the racial struggles of the 1960s, confrontations between blacks and the police often centered around cars. In the summer of 1964, the urban uprising in Watts, a neighborhood in south-central Los Angeles, an expression of deeply-rooted grievances about the economy and second-class status among the city's segregated black community, was sparked by a clash between blacks and the police who had pulled over a black woman suspected of driving under the influence. In Watts, as in the hundreds of civil disturbances in American cities during the 1960s, random car stops and searches and roadblocks were an essential part of riot control. Civil rights and black power protestors in the 1960s also incorporated the automobile into their protest strategies. On the opening day of the 1964 World's Fair, New York civil rights activists held a controversial (but unsuccessful) "stall in" on the expressway leading to the fairgrounds. Cars became the vehicles for protest and racial conflict alike.

"Drivin' down the Freeway:" Blacks and Car Culture

Whatever the hassles of driving, African Americans, like whites, shared a passion for cars. The automobile was, for most Americans, the most expensive item that they owned other than a house. In a status-conscious consumer society, the car became one of the most prominent symbols of "making it." The automobile industry, which developed some of the most sophisticated marketing and advertising campaigns of the twentieth century, appealed to consumers' desire to drive cars that played to their self-image. Auto manufacturers developed new models that were luxurious, sporty, sturdy, or family-friendly. As blacks moved northward and into the urban working class, their income grew dramatically. So did their demand for cars. *Ebony* magazine estimated that twenty percent of

black households intended to buy new cars in the 1958 model year alone. Throughout the postwar years, car companies began to target black consumers, placing advertisements in black newspapers and especially in new magazines like *Ebony* and *Jet* that catered to the small but growing black middle class.

For many blacks, owning a car became a powerful status symbol. Starting at the top, black stars often appeared for photographs with sports or luxury cars. In a famous photograph, Motown singers Martha and the Vandellas struck a glamorous pose atop a Ford Mustang as it rolled off a Detroit assembly line. Singers Marvin Gaye and Gladys Knight and the Pips posed for publicity photos with their cars. And in a hit single, Detroit native Aretha Franklin sang of her "Pink Cadillac." Motown performer Mary Wilson recalled that "[a]s soon as a writer, producer, or performer got his first check, it was as good as endorsed over to the local Cadillac dealership." The Cadillac assumed iconic status among the black elite as a symbol of having made it. In 1949, *Ebony* magazine asked its readers "Why Do Negroes Buy Cadillacs?" In an irreverent spoof of the gospel classic, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," jazz musician Dizzie Gillespie sang "Swing Low, Sweet Cadillac," a telling comment on the place of the car in black popular culture.

In the post-Motown era of "blaxploitation" ilms and, in the 1980s and 1990s, of gangsta rap and hip hop, cars continued to have special status in black popular culture. The heroes of black film sensations of the 1970s--*Superfly*, *Sweet Sweetback*, and *Shaft*--all drove specially designed, low-riding, hot rods that were decked out in chrome and gold trim. Cars also figured prominently in gangsta rap. Public Enemy, one of the most popular rap groups of the late 1980s and early 1990s, dedicated a whole song to the virtues of the Ninety Eight, the largest, most powerful, and most luxurious of the Oldsmobile sedans. Black popular culture appropriated the automobile--as both a symbol of the American "good life" and as a sign of a distinctive, separate black culture.

Image versus Reality

If popular culture celebrated blacks and their big cars, the lived reality of many African Americans stood in sharp contrast. Because blacks were more likely to be poor than whites (in 1960, nearly half of the nation's blacks lived beneath the poverty line), they were less likely to be able to afford new cars and, for most of the twentieth-century, they had difficulties getting car loans and paid more for insurance because of the discriminatory attitudes of bankers and actuaries. When they bought cars, most had to go to white car dealerships. Until 1940, when Ed Davis opened up a Studebaker dealership in Detroit, there were no black-owned car dealerships in the United States. In 1963, Davis became Chrysler's first black dealer--and possibly the first black to own a "Big Three" franchise. In the post-1960s years, car dealerships became an important vehicle for black upward mobility: by 1987, 53 of the top 100 black-owned companies

in the United States were auto dealerships (although, as a reminder of the black-white gap in the business world, the top 100 white-owned companies dwarfed car dealerships: whites owned nearly all companies on the Fortune 500 list). Even if blacks owned more car dealerships than ever before, white-owned car dealers still dominated the market and often treated black customers unequally. As late as the 1990s, when the Urban League sent out matched pairs of black and white car buyers, they found that black consumers paid, on average, higher interest rates and higher fees than did whites who had the same income and credit history.

The automobile preferences of well-to-do blacks became the source of pernicious racial stereotypes. By the late 1960s, white, conservative critics of welfare created a powerful and enduring (even if completely fictional) image of "welfare queens" who drove Cadillacs--black single mothers who supposedly lived decadent lives off of their AFDC checks. It was, of course, impossible to pay for a new luxury car on a meager welfare check. What made the "welfare queen" stereotype so dubious was that poor blacks were far less likely to own cars than any other segment of the population.

The lack of access to reliable cars became a major contributing factor to the problem of poverty. Over the last half of the twentieth century, as metropolitan areas sprawled outward and public transportation systems faced cutbacks, access to a car became crucial to economic success. Suburban employers who sought low-wage minority employees (such as office park janitors, shopping center stockroom workers, and kitchen staff) faced a dilemma. Patterns of residential segregation by race and class meant that most black and other minority workers lived a great distance from the most-rapidly growing workplaces. In addition those workplaces were only accessible by car.

Writing in 1968, economist John Kain coined the phrase "spatial mismatch" to describe the fact that most new jobs were being created in suburban areas--only accessible by car--while the minority population was concentrated in inner cities, often distant from workplaces. By the turn of the twenty-first century, as metropolitan areas sprawled even further outward, the effects of that spatial mismatch remained pronounced in many major metropolitan areas. In sprawlng metropolitan America, access to a reliable car has remained a key to economic success. Yet studies showed that minorities were far more reliant on public transportation than whites (in 2001, 54 percent of all public transportation users in the U.S. were black and Hispanic). 87.6 percent of whites in 2001 traveled to work by car, while over 21 percent of blacks got to work by other means of transportation (including public transportation, bike, and foot). And in many large cities, high rates of insurance and problems with driver's licenses kept sizeable segments of the minority population from being able to drive cars legally or safely. The poor and especially poor

minorities suffered from the effects of transportation inequality. Cars opened up opportunities to those with access to them, but the lack of reliable transportation contributed to the problem of persistent racial inequality in modern America.

On the Line: Blacks and Auto Work

Blacks were not just consumers of the car. Their history was also intertwined with the history of automobile production. Here, too, the historical record was mixed. Detroit, the Motor City, became one of the most important destinations for black migrants from the south because of its reputation as a major center of car production. But the door to auto factory jobs opened slowly for blacks. Until World War II, the auto industry was not a particularly important employer of African Americans. The vast majority of blacks worked in service sector employment or in the agricultural sector. Before World War II, blacks found employment in only a handful of auto companies. Ford, Briggs, and Dodge pioneered the hiring of black workers. Still, in 1940, only three percent of the auto industry workforce was black, the vast majority of whom worked for Ford (where 12 percent of the workforce was black at the outset of World War II). Most black workers were overqualified for the jobs that they held. Economic historians Warren Whatley and Thomas Mahoney found that black automobile workers were better educated, older, and had more experience than their white counterparts. Because of pervasive discrimination against black workers, auto manufacturers were able to be picky--and select the most qualified black workers from the enormous pool. With few exceptions, blacks who were fortunate enough to get auto industry jobs found themselves confined to race-typed jobs such as maintenance work or employment in the hot and dangerous foundry or in the paint room, where they breathed noxious fumes.

World War II was a watershed in black employment. The war witnessed a burst of civil rights activism, led by black organizations and by interracial trade unions. In 1940, labor leader A. Philip Randolph threatened a March on Washington to demand the employment of blacks in wartime industry. In late June 1940, just weeks before the proposed march, President Franklin Roosevelt signed an executive order creating the federal Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC), a temporary agency that had as its mission the eradication of workplace discrimination. The FEPC was poorly funded--largely because of the opposition of Southern members of Congress to civil rights efforts. It held hearings and investigated workplace discrimination, although it achieved few victories. But whatever its weaknesses, the FEPC raised the consciousness of black workers and civil rights-oriented unionists who pushed for racial equality in the workplace. Throughout the country, black workers demanded equal opportunity in hiring and promotion, marched and engaged in wildcat strikes in the workplace to demand fair treatment, and used union-negotiated contracts to ensure that blacks and whites received equal pay and equal protection under seniority and other workplace procedures.

Civil rights activism alone did not, however, open workplaces to blacks. Corporate leaders, facing a desperate shortage of workers because of wartime mobilization and the draft, opened their doors to black workers for the first time. By 1945, blacks comprised fifteen percent of Detroit's automobile industry workforce--a huge increase over the pre-World War II employment figures. Because auto industry jobs were unionized and relatively well-paying, black autoworkers formed a black labor "aristocracy." Work in auto plants was a big step up for blacks who had been disproportionately stuck in janitorial positions, personal service jobs, and menial farm labor before World War II. Auto industry jobs were unionized--and as a result paid relatively high wages, offered generous benefits (including, by the 1950s, medical insurance and pensions), and offered job protection through seniority rules. The United Automobile Workers union also created a Fair Employment Practices Department, beginning in 1944, which provided black workers with a way to redress their grievances against workplace discrimination and to organize to promote workplace civil rights.

Despite the big gains in auto work during World War II, blacks were still more likely to hold unskilled jobs than whites. They were concentrated in the least desirable auto industry jobs (for example, the foundries and paint rooms became overwhelmingly black departments in many auto plants). And blacks--because they were at the end of the seniority line--were especially vulnerable to layoffs and unemployment when auto plants reorganized work or shut down.

Blacks did not lose their foothold in the auto industry, but their fortunes were greatly affected by two major changes in auto production beginning in the immediate post-World War II years. First, auto manufacturers began to decentralize production, building new plants in suburban and rural areas, increasingly in the South. Many of the suburban and rural areas in the North had minuscule black populations--and thus heavily white workforces. And until the passage of the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964, most southern plants practiced overt racial segregation, shutting out blacks altogether or creating separate, segregated seniority lines. At the same time, many auto manufacturers introduced new "automated" technologies, designed to reduce the number of unskilled workers on assembly lines. Because blacks were overrepresented in the ranks of entry-level and unskilled workers, they bore the brunt of the job loss associated with automation. The great irony of postwar auto industry history was that just as blacks found themselves on the first rung of the ladder of economic mobility in the auto industry, that rung was cut away by decentralization and automation.

The civil rights legislation and grassroots black activism of the 1960s opened more auto industry jobs to blacks--

mainly in the older plants located in major cities. In Detroit, in response to pressure from civil rights activists, the Big Three automobile manufacturers--Chrysler, Ford, and General Motors--reached out and created jobs for the "hardcore unemployed," largely young black men with little work experience. The Trade Union Leadership Council (TULC), a black-led reform organization created in the late 1950s, pushed for the expansion of the number of blacks into well-paying skilled positions and as foremen. Over the course of the 1960s, auto manufacturers (fearful of protests and possible lawsuits) expanded the rolls of black electricians, toolmakers, and pipe fitters.

By 1970, about one in five Detroit auto workers was black, a sizeable increase from 1960, when they held only about sixteen percent of auto industry jobs. Despite these gains, the racial hierarchy of auto assembly plants remained deeply entrenched. Relatively few blacks worked in the well-paying skilled trades; even fewer worked as foremen and superintendents; and hardly any had white-collar positions. Amidst the growing call for black power in the late 1960s, many auto assembly plants became racial battlegrounds. Black workers at Chrysler and Dodge plants--followed by their counterparts in many other assembly facilities--formed "Revolutionary Union Movements" or RUMs. From pickets to wildcat strikes to deliberate slow-downs on the assembly lines, the RUMs were the most visible manifestation of growing discontent among black workers.

That said, life was good for blacks who were able to hold onto their assembly line jobs. Steadily employed black auto workers made enough money to buy their own homes, to put away money for retirement, to own their own cars, and even to send their children to college. In metropolitan areas with big auto plants--like Detroit and Cleveland and Oakland--black auto workers were among the most visible leaders of labor organizations, churches, and civil rights groups. And even those who did not serve as organizational leaders often made important contributions to the burgeoning civil rights movement. It is no surprise that Detroit, the city with the largest number of black auto workers, was also home to the nation's largest chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and some of the nation's most politically influential black churches. Auto work provided black workers with resources that few other jobs did--and they invested their resources back into community organizations and churches.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, however, auto work became less important a source of employment for blacks. Many new automobile plants opened in predominantly white sections of the upper South. Still others fled the United States altogether, locating production in places like small-town Ontario, Canada, and the Maquiladora region of Mexico (along the U.S.-Mexico border). The American-born automobile industry workforce--black and white--shrunk to a new low by 2000.

Over the last one hundred years, the automobile industry has played a crucial role in African American history, for blacks were both producers and consumers of the car. The car brought mobility--geographic and economic--to blacks. It freed them from the shackles of Jim Crow public transportation, became a symbol of black economic aspirations, and served as one of black America's major employers. Yet automobile-related discrimination and inequalities were frustratingly persistent. Blacks can use service station restrooms and stay in most roadside motels without hassle. Racially-mixed groups of people in cars do not generate much suspicion, as they did in the days of Jim Crow. But blacks are still less likely to own cars, more likely to pay more for them, and disproportionately likely to get pulled over because of their race. The history of the automobile and black America--like the history of American race relations itself--is a story of hopes only partially met, of opportunities found and lost. Encapsulated in the history of the car is story of black America's ongoing, still unfinished, struggle for freedom and equality.

For Further Reading

The history of race and the automobile has yet to be written; thus the material for this article is scattered widely in many sources. The most helpful are included in the annotated bibliography below.

The controversy over racial profiling was extensively covered in daily newspapers and newsweeklies. For further reading, see David A. Harris, *Profiles in Injustice: Why Racial Profiling Cannot Work* (New York: The New Press, 2002); the brief but useful summary of the profiling controversy in Michael K. Brown, et al., *White-Washing Race: The Myth of a Color Blind Society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003); and the most widely quoted report on profiling: State of New Jersey, Office of the Attorney General. *Selected Highlights of the Interim Report of the State Police Review Team Regarding Allegations of Racial Profiling.* (Trenton: Office of the Attorney General, 1999).

For the experiences of black travelers (and for an indispensable and encyclopedic discussion of the broader context of race relations and discrimination in mid-twentieth century America), see Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Democracy*, 2 volumes (New York: Harper Brothers, 1944). For comments on driving in the South, see Arthur Raper, *Preface to Peasantry: A Tale of Two Black Belt Counties* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1936). On the experience of black travelers, see Mark S. Foster, "In the Face of 'Jim Crow': Prosperous Blacks and Vacations, Travel, and Outdoor Leisure, 1890-1945," *Journal of Negro History* 84:2 (Spring 1999). For the autobiography of a pioneering black car dealer, see Ed Davis, *One Man's Way* (Detroit: Ed Davis Associates, 1979).

Two useful starting points for a discussion of the automobile in black popular culture are Suzanne E. Smith, *Dancing in the Streets: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); and George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

The classic article on poverty, race, and the "spatial mismatch" is John F. Kain, "Housing Segregation, Negro Employment, and Metropolitan Decentralization," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 82 (May 1968), 175-97. The best overview of the scholarship on spatial mismatch, with special attention to transportation policy, is Margaret Pugh, "Barriers to Work: The Spatial Divide Between Jobs and Welfare Recipients in Metropolitan Areas," Brookings Institution, Center for Metropolitan and Urban Policy Working Paper, September 1998. For data on transportation options by race and class, see John Pucher and John L. Penne, "Socioeconomics of Urban Travel: Evidence from the 2001 NHTS," *Transportation Quarterly* 57:3 (Summer 2003), 49-77.

The relationship of blacks to automobile work is the subject of an extensive literature. On workplace discrimination in the motor vehicle industry, see Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), esp. chapter 4; Thomas N. Maloney and Warren C. Whatley, "Making the Effort: The Contours of Racial Discrimination in Detroit's Labor Markets, 1920-1940," *Journal of Economic History* 55 (1995), 483-486; and August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979). On challenges against workplace discrimination, see especially Kevin Boyle, "'There Are No Union Sorrows That the Union Can't Heal': The Struggle for Racial Equality in the United Automobile Workers, 1940-1960," *Labor History* 36 (Winter 1995), 5-23. For the revolutionary union movements and shopfloor radicalism among black workers in the 1960s and 1970s, see Heather Thompson, *Whose Detroit? Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); James A. Geschwender, *Class, Race, and Worker Insurgency: The League of Revolutionary Black Workers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977)